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ABSTRACT

In this speech the author discusses Project Chance: Alternatives for Women. The innovative community-based program in New York City was designed to meet the special needs of adult women whose education has been interrupted. The first half of the presentation briefly describes varied aspects of the program, such as re-entry non-credit courses, credit courses, coordination, the core syllabus in skill development, flexible teaching materials, and evaluation. The last half of the speech, placing the Project in the larger national and longer historical perspective, covers the relationship between the women's movement and the push for continuing education for women, economic discrimination experienced by women, and the need for women to take advantage of increased educational opportunities to improve their job status, particularly in the professional and technical areas. (EM)

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INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RETURNING WOMAN

Presented for the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women
at District Council 37, New York City
November, 1977

by Batya Weinbaum
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Welcome to the Continuing Education Workshop of the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women. I am proud to be here to represent Project Chance: Alternatives for Women, a three year model program funded since Fall of 1976 by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) and, additionally, by the New York Community Trust. We are co-sponsored by the Women's Center and the Women's Studies Program of Brooklyn College. Our staff is charged to design, plan, implement and evaluate an innovative community-based program designed to meet the special needs of adult women whose education has been interrupted.

Through intensive outreach at the beginning of the Project, we have recruited a population that reflects the economic, ethnic, and racial heterogeneity of the Brooklyn community. The primary goal is to provide a supportive environment in which we can assist adult women in making choices about their lives. Not all

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Project Chance participants enroll in college; not all participants who enroll in college enroll in Brooklyn College; some participants serve their best interests by entering or re-entering the work force or remaining active in community life.

The most distinctive aspect of the Project's academic component is the re-entry course, originally a ten-week, now a fourteen-week, free non-credit bearing course which meets once a week for three hours. The re-entry courses, offered at Brooklyn College and at community sites in Brownsville, Bay Ridge, and Park Slope, are team taught by a basic skills instructor and a counselor. Each instructor, or "facilitator," works with one half the class (the maximum size is 32 participants) for half of the class for the second half of the session.

Credit courses offered by the Project reflect a pattern of combining traditional courses, such as English Composition, Psychology, and Sociology, with innovative courses, such as Third World Women. We also offer an array of successful and popular support services: math anxiety workshops, credit course survival skills workshops, assertiveness training, writing skills workshops and tutoring, and academic, personal and vocational counseling. As we stated before, not all our participants choose to

come to Brooklyn College, but we want to assure academic success to those who do.

Our efforts are coordinated under the auspices of a Community Advisory Board (CAB) which is made up of students, Project staff, the Women's Center and Women's Studies Program representatives, as well as community groups such as the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, the Downtown Welfare Advocacy Center and Project sites: Union Center for Women in Bayridge, Children and Youth Development Services and the YWCA in Park Slope, and the Community Development Corporation in Brownsville. This board, which meets monthly, functions as a board of trustees to the program. The board expands as we engage new sites. We are currently seeking sites in the Hispanic and the Russian Jewish communities.

Within the courses, there is a core syllabus in the area of skills development (including report writing, reading, observation, note-making, outlining, using the library, interviewing). The teaching materials are flexible, designed to be adapted to the needs of particular groups of women at individual sites. For example the proposed site in the Spanish-speaking community would use materials in Spanish, along the lines of

the English as a Second Language program which the women might continue once they entered the college. Russian, Hebrew or Yiddish might be used in the Soviet Jewish site in much the same way. This flexibility is the outstanding feature which distinguishes the curriculum of the re-entry course from other adult education projects. The method by which the course is developed and implemented involves dialogue among all the women involved in the program. This includes students as well as staff, project directors, teachers, counselors and CAB.

The academic component of the Project is banked not only by the strong support system of counseling, but also by an active component of research and evaluation. The research team gathers continual feedback from all participants which assists the core staff in self-evaluation and thus in refining the on-going development of the program.

We find that to develop our program adequately, we need to gather information to place our Project in the larger national and longer historical perspective. In doing background research to establish a long term context for evaluating the program, we have discovered just how closely activities such as ours are

tied to the women's movement.

The push for continuing education for women itself is a movement which has been in existence for about ten years. It started in the early 1960's when a handful of university teachers began to tailor courses specifically for the needs of mature women. Their efforts were really an outgrowth of the women's movement. If you remember back a few years ago, a lot of women were deciding that they no longer wished to be limited to their role in the home. Still others who were already working began to decide that they wished to improve their working situation. Many expressed their discontent with discrimination against women in this society, especially economic discrimination. And the continuing education movement is an attempt to service that growing discontent among women.

Economic discrimination against women in the work force is not traceable solely to women's lack of education. For example, in the course of doing research as part of an effort to design a better program, I discovered that of all working people, more women have completed high school than men. In 1974, for instance, 44% of all working women had completed high school; and 13 % of women had gone on through four years of college to obtain a degree. Meanwhile, only 36% of men had high school degrees; although 16% of men had completed four years of college education. In these figures we can see that although women as a whole had completed more high school than men, males seem to rank in the upper levels of higher education.[1]

With this discrepancy between high school and further education, it is clear why there is a need for the types of innovative programs which encourage women to go back to college. In this light, we should not be surprised to discover that a majority of students in all continuing education programs in the city and around the country are women.

Nevertheless, a form of sex discrimination reigns within those programs. This is why we stress that the promotion of education alone is not a sufficient solution to the original problems of economic discrimination against women. The question must always be asked--education for what? Most of the programs in which women predominate as students offer courses in home economics, consumer education, office making and homemaking skills. Although these skills are useful, this education as such does very little to assist women in their exit from society's traditional female positions. Other schooling of more gainfully vocational interest seems to be limited to men. For example, in programs offering technical degrees, industrial skills, or higher levels of education which lead to better-paying jobs, males predominate.

One of the innovative goals at Project Chance is to not only assist women to further their education, but to do so in such a way that if they desire it they can try to step out of the sex-role channeling. This is of major concern to many involved in administering similar programs. Under pressure, the federal government passed Title 9.

This educational amendment has outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex in vocational training areas since 1972. We have discovered that any educational program which receives federal funding is not allowed to refuse entrance to women to those training categories which have been traditionally restricted to men.

Recently, the Women's Bureau of the US Department of Labor made a national count and learned that there were 500 programs designed specifically for women's needs around the country. This is quite a growth from ten years ago when there were only a small number of educational institutions around the country which offered maybe one or two courses specially geared for the returning woman. How is it possible to account for this trend? Originally the impetus came from women who wanted to go back to work after being a housewife or a mother for several years. Yet increasingly, an additional impetus comes from employed women who have an interest in gaining skills and knowledge that will enable them to change jobs or to improve their chances for advancement in jobs they currently hold.

This increase in opportunities for women should be considered in the light of overall changes in the labor force. Over the past few years, education has become increasingly important. In 1952, of the total labor force, the median years of school completed was 10.9. This meant many people did not even finish high school. By now, the median years of school completed by people in the labor force is 12.5. Furthermore, that area requiring further education--the professional-technical grouping--is going up in the next ten years. This category will experience the biggest jump in the labor force, with a projected 48% increase.[2]

By acting now, women are trying to catch up with a continually receding target. Project Chance and other programs realize this, and also that women's income is not just for luxury or "pin" money. We also bear in mind that education is neither an end in itself, nor a solution. Rather, education is a means to an end. Wage differentials even among the more educated brackets of the labor force are actually increasing.[3]

SOURCES

1. Pat Cayo Sexton, Women in Education, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Indiana. Unless otherwise cited, further statistical references are from this document.

2. National Advisory Council on Adult Education, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

3. See: Most Women Work Because of Economic Need:Women in the Labor Force, by Marital Status, March 1976, prepared by the Women's Bureau, Employment Standards Administration; and Fully Employed Women Continue to Earn Less Than Fully Employed Men of Either White or Minority Races, prepared by the Women's Bureau, Employment Standards Administration, August, 1977.